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THE LITURGICAL PLACE OF THE KONTAKION IN CONSTANTINOPLE¹

Since the time of Cardinal J.B. Pitra, it has generally been assumed that the kontakia of Romanos and other early hymnographers were once the dominant form of hymnography in Byzantine matins, but were curtailed to their first two stanzas after the advent of the kanon². This traditional view of the kontakion's liturgical place was rejected by José Grosdidier de Matons, who, arguing from a careful examination of the style and content of the kontakia themselves, asserted that kontakia had never occupied the present place of the kanon in monastic orthros³. He believed that the kontakia of Romanos, in keeping with their origins as poetic sermons, were originally written for the instruction of the laity at cathedral vigils⁴, and only after at least two centuries were they adapted to the monastic office⁵.

While Grosdidier de Matons' identification of the cathedral vigil as the original home of the kontakion is generally consistent with his literary evidence, he unfortunately has very little to say about the nature and structure of these nocturnal rites. Curiously, he also seems unaware of even the existence of a distinctly Constantinopolitan cathedral rite (the *asmatike akolouthia* or "sung office") that differed from the Palestinian monastic rite⁶. In an attempt to remedy this situation, the present study will briefly examine the question of the kontakion's relationship to the *asmatike akolouthia*.

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²This theory is found most recently in Christian Thodberg's article on the "Kontakion" in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* / Ed. S. Sadie. 1980.

³Grosdidier de Matons J. Liturgie et Hymnographie: Kontakion et Canon // DOP. 1980-1981. 34/35. 36.

⁴Idem. *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance*. Paris, 1977. 104.

⁵Idem. Liturgie et Hymnographie... 42.

⁶E.g. his mistaken equation of the monastic psalter with the Constantinopolitan "sung" psalter: Idem. *Romanos le Mélode*... 103.

This investigation will be divided into two sections, the first of which will discuss the vigils of Romanos's time, while the second will look at the liturgical use of the *kontakion* in later cathedral practice.

I. The Kontakion in Early Cathedral Vigils

Before proceeding to the documents of the cathedral rite itself, it is helpful to recall several elements of Grosdidier de Matons' circumstantial case for the performance of *kontakia* at urban vigils. The first of these is what appears to be a clear reference to public vigils in the text of Romanos's hymn *On the Man possessed with Devils*⁷:

The faithful people in love of Christ
Coming together keep nightly vigil with
psalms and odes,
Unceasingly singing hymns to God.
After a psalm was sung,
We were gladdened by a well-ordered reading
of the Scriptures.
Again we sang hymns to Christ and
publicly pilloried the enemy⁸.

Another important piece of evidence is to be found in the *vita* of Romanos himself. According to the published version, Romanos was assigned to the church of the Theotokos in the Kyrou section of Constantinople, but significantly also frequented the vigil, or *pannychis*, at Blachernae⁹. In its account of the famous legend of the Virgin Mary's appearance to Romanos on the Feast of the Lord's Nativity, the *vita* mentions that, after swallowing the scroll given to him by the Theotokos, he ascended the ambon and began to sing his *kontakion* for Christmas, Ἡ Παρθένος σήμερον.

Finally, Grosdidier de Matons cites the seventh-century *Miracula S. Artemii*, which describes the performance of hymnography by Romanos at a popular (as opposed to monastic) vigil at the church of St. John the Baptist in Ochia. According to this document, a soloist chanted hymns by Romanos at a service that also included a set of three ordinary (but unspecified) antiphons from the psalter, and a procession¹⁰.

⁷Idem. *Le Kontakion // Gattungen der Musik in Einzeldarstellung: Gedenkschrift Leo Schrade*. I. Bern, Munich, 1973. 255.

⁸*Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist. I: On the Person of Christ* / Transl. by M. Carpenter. Columbia, Miss., 1970. 111.

⁹*Menaion* for October. Athens, 1970. 14.

¹⁰Grosdidier de Matons *J. Romanos le Mélode...* 103.

Because no texts or books of rubrics survive from this period, we unfortunately have very little direct information about the Constantinopolitan *agrypnies* of Romanos's day. According to Fr. Robert Taft, occasional vigils for the laity were already taking place in the capital during the ill-fated patriarchate of John Chrysostom (397-404)¹¹. In order to compete with the nocturnal assemblies of the Arians, Chrysostom inaugurated Orthodox "nocturnal stations". These events, which featured parades through the streets accompanied by (unidentified) hymnody, were the forerunners of the stational rites of Constantinople as well as, presumably, the procession of the laity described in the *Miracula S. Artemii*.

Fortunately, other descriptions of early Christian vigils for the laity abound, for they appear to have been relatively common events. In addition to the well-known account of the fourth-century Jerusalemite vigil by the pilgrim Egeria, similar rites are noted by Athanasios of Alexandria, Basil the Great, and John Cassian. Of these authors, Cassian provides the most specific set of instructions for the psalms and readings, which are as follows:

Standing: 3 antiphonal psalms

Seated: 3 responsorial psalms
3 lessons¹²

Assessing the phenomenon of occasional vigils, Fr. Taft notes that these "pre-eucharistic" services were

"... characterised by cathedral psalmody, prayer, and readings, chiefly but not exclusively from the Scriptures. The psalmody was responsorial or antiphonal, and must not be confused with the meditative, continuous psalmody of monastic vigils and nocturns. ... Of special importance was the *proclamation of the Word* in the lections and homily"¹³.

The points of contact between these services, which were performed for the edification of Christians on certain days of the year, and the metrical homilies of Romanos are striking, and would seem to confirm the existence of the nocturnal assemblies postulated by Grosdidier de Matons. The essential elements of the vigils described in the hymn *On the Man possessed with Devils* and the *Miracula S. Artemii*, namely the singing of psalms followed by the reading of lessons, are held in common with these other assemblies.

¹¹Taft R. *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*. Collegeville, Minn., 1986. 171-172.

¹²*Ibid.*, 177.

¹³*Ibid.*, 189-190.

II. The Kontakion in Later Cathedral Usage

In the course of the three centuries that followed the death of Romanos, full kontakia continued to be produced at varying rates, most of them hagiographical poems written to fill out the rapidly expanding *sanctorale*¹⁴. The final flowering of this genre took place in the ninth century at the monastery of Studios in Constantinople, which was primarily a centre for the production of kanons and stichera. Not surprisingly, these late kontakia reflect their monastic origin by substituting ritualistic praise for drama and narrative, becoming almost indistinguishable in their content from contemporary canons¹⁵.

Despite the stylistic changes that had occurred in liturgical poetry, it appears that the rise of monastic hymnography had little immediate effect on the rites of the Great Church, which continued to perform the *asmatike akolouthia* regularly until the Latin conquest in 1204. The asmatic offices of the tenth and eleventh centuries maintained a highly conservative structure that included very little meditative and non-participatory hymnody, instead consisting mainly of responsorial psalms and canticles.

This conservatism is especially evident in the cathedral rite's two nocturnal services, the so-called "little" offices of *pannychis* and *mesonyktikon*. These structurally identical services contain five prayers and, like the vigil described in the *Miracula S. Artemii*, three "antiphons" of responsorial psalms¹⁶. Moreover, while *mesonyktikon* appears to have been a regular part of the Great Church's daily cycle of offices¹⁷, the office of *pannychis* was sung only on solemn feasts and during Lent¹⁸.

Not surprisingly, then, the few existing explicit references to full kontakia in the *typika*, *synaxaria*, and *kanonaria* of the cathedral rite point exclusively to their performance in the course of the occasional vigil, or *pannychis*. The most well-known instances are to be found in the MSS Patmos 266 (9–10th c.) and Dresden 104 A (11th c.), both of which contain rubrics calling for the performance of the Akathistos in the context of a

¹⁴Grosdidier de Matons J. Kontakion et Canon: Piété populaire et liturgie officielle à Byzance // *Augustinianum*. 1980. 20. 195.

¹⁵Idem. Le Kontakion. 263.

¹⁶Arranz M. Les prières presbytérales des matines byzantines // OCP. 1971. 37. 413.

¹⁷Idem. La liturgie des heures selon l'ancien Euchologe byzantin // *Eulogia: Miscellanea liturgica in onore di P. Burkhard Neunheuser*. (Studia Anselmiana, 68: *Analeceta Liturgica*, 1). Rome, 1979. 11.

¹⁸Idem. L'office de l'Asmatikos Orthros de l'ancien Euchologe byzantin // OCP. 1981. 47. 156.

pannychis at the church of the Theotokos in Blachernae¹⁹.

A lesser-known but similar reference to what is presumably a complete *kontakion* occurs among the rubrics for 1 September in the MS Auct. E. 5 10 of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, dated 1329. Described by J. Mateos as a Cypriot adaptation of an earlier Constantinopolitan *synazarion*²⁰, this manuscript gives the following order of service after the completion of vespers:

- *proanagnosis* from Proverbs
- *vita* of St. Symeon the Stylite
- office of *pannychis*
- singing of the *kontakion* Τὰ ἔνω ζῆτων
- 3 midnight antiphons
- another (unspecified) reading²¹

On reflection, the continued presence of these two *kontakia* in their original liturgical context at this late date, the persistence of the ancient cathedral vigil, and the relatively late vintage of the earliest manuscripts to contain the texts of the *kontakia* (10–11th c.), would seem to suggest the possibility that other *kontakia* were still being performed in the course of a *pannychis*. Interestingly, a distinct correlation also remained between the days with especially solemn celebrations of the *pannychis* and the feasts provided with *kontakia* by the early melodes.

On eighteen days of the year, the *typicon* of the Great Church calls for a special kind of *pannychis* that includes various readings (*proanagnoseis*). The faithful, in a manner reminiscent of the scenes in *On the Man possessed with Devils* and the *Miracula S. Artemii*, would remain in the nave of the church throughout the night. Matins, which usually began in the narthex, would then commence directly from the ambon. As can be seen from Table 1, two-thirds of these days, which include all of the Christological and most of the universally celebrated Marian feasts, are provided with *kontakia* by early hymnographers. Therefore, even if these responsorial hymns were no longer included among the festal readings, the liturgical framework that had spawned them remained intact centuries after their initial creation.

¹⁹The rubrics are quoted in Egon Wellesz's introduction to his transcription of the music for the *Akathistos Hymn*. (MMB: Transcripta, 9). Copenhagen, 1957. XVI–XVII. In addition, the order of service for Dresden 104 A is given by Arranz M. Les prières presbytérales de la "Pannychis", I // OCP. 1974. 40. 336.

²⁰Mateos J. (ed.) *Le Typicon de la Grande Eglise*, I. (OCA, 165). Rome, 1962. V–VII.

²¹Ibid. 4.

Table 1

A — Fixed Feasts

Date	Feast	Kontakion
1 Sept.	Indiction and St. Symeon the Stylite	yes (pseudo-Romanos)
8 Sept.	Nativity of the Theotokos	yes (Romanos)
14 Sept.	Exaltation of the Holy Cross	yes (Romanos) ²²
18 Dec.	Dedication of the church at Chalkoprateia	no
23 Dec.	Dedication of <i>Hagia Sophia</i>	no
25 Dec.	Feast of the Lord's Nativity	yes (Romanos)
6 Jan.	Theophany	yes (Romanos)
2 Feb.	Feast of the Lord's Presentation	yes (Romanos)
11 May.	Founding of Constantinople	no
16 July	Council of Chalcedon	yes(?) ²³
6 Aug.	Transfiguration	yes
16 Aug.	Lifting of the siege of 717-718	no

B — Movable Feasts

Palm Sunday	yes (Romanos)
Feast of the Theotokos at Chalkoprateia	no
Ascension	yes (Romanos)
Sunday before Pentecost	yes ²⁴
Pentecost	yes (Romanos)

²²Although the anonymous kontakion Ὁ ὑψοθεῖς ἐν τῷ Σταυρῷ is now prescribed for this feast, Grosdidier de Matons asserts that Romanos's hymn *On the Adoration of the Holy Cross* was originally intended for this feast. See *Romanos le Mélode. Hymnes*, IV / Ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons. (SC, 128). Paris, 1967. 313-315; and Idem. *Romanos le Mélode et les origines...* 55.

²³Grosdidier de Matons suggests that the anonymous kontakion *On the Holy Fathers* (7th c.?), which Maas attributes to Romanos himself, may have been intended for this ancient feast. See Grosdidier de Matons J. *Romanos le Mélode...* 209-212; and Trypanis C.A. *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica*. (WBS, 5). Vienna, 1968. 87-100.

²⁴See the preceding note.

Editorial note: In the earliest manuscripts of the *kontakaria* dating from the Xth and XIth centuries the kontakion mentioned in the preceding note (and sung, probably, on the 16th of July) is attached to the *Fathers of Nicaea*, commemorated on the Sunday before Pentecost. See Trypanis C.A. *Op. cit.* 87-91. As the kontakion concerns in fact the *Holy Fathers* of all the "oecumenical" councils, it may have been included into the orderings of both the feasts.

Coda: The Decline of the Kontakion

Given the kontakion's origins in popular vigils, the persistence of these services within the mature *asmatike akolouthia*, and the fact that kontakia were still being written as late as the ninth century, it is no longer possible to maintain that the hymns of Romanos and the other early melodies were replaced by kanons in the seventh or eighth century. On the contrary, kanons had no place at all within Constantinopolitan cathedral worship, but were a prominent feature of the Palestinian monastic rite imported by St. Theodore the Studite at the very end of this period. It was only through the Studite monks' rapid assimilation of cathedral forms that the kontakion attained its present place within Sabaïtic orthros.

From their ninth-century adoption by the Studites to the Latin conquest of 1204, kontakia were held in common by the two Constantinopolitan rites. For the first half of this period, during which many kontakia were transmitted intact²⁵, it appears that these ancient hymns were still performed without significant abbreviation. By the twelfth century, however, the curtailment of the kontakion was well under way, and the number of stanzas included in (text-only) kontakaria dropped precipitously²⁶. This era of bi-ritual performance ends with the kontakion reduced to its present two stanzas, as exemplified by the musically notated cycles found in copies of the *psaltikon*²⁷.

With the time of the kontakion's radical abbreviation thus moved forward by some four hundred years to the zenith of cathedral and Studite co-existence, the impact of recent musical developments upon this process must be taken into account. Perhaps more than coincidentally, the period of the kontakion's decline as a poetic sermon also marks the rise of a Byzantine musical notation which, in turn, facilitated the composition and transmission of a growing repertory of florid chants. In view of the fact that the first notated kontakia and oikoi are among the more melismatic chants of the

²⁵In addition to appearing in eleventh-century *kontakaria* like the famous MSS Patmos 212 and 213, complete kontakia are also transmitted in a number of South Italian Studite *menaia* dating from the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. See Grosdidier de Matons J. *Romanos le Mélode et les origines...* 69.

²⁶Ibid. 101-102.

²⁷The *psaltikon* is a soloist's book of chants employed by both rites. In addition to truncated kontakia, surviving *psaltika* contain cycles of hypacoai, alleluaria, and prokeimena. E.g. the Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae's facsimile edition of the South-Italian *Con-tacarium Ashburnhamense* / Ed. by C. Høeg. (MMB, 4). Copenhagen, 1956.

so-called “classical” Byzantine repertory, it is conceivable that in response to changing liturgical tastes, these hymns evolved into ornate arias, with text suffering at the hands of elaborate music. If so, it remains to be determined whether the impetus for this metamorphosis came from the cantors of Hagia Sophia or the monks of Studios.